

1
2
3
4
5 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
6 WESTERN DISTRICT OF WASHINGTON
7 AT TACOMA

8 RICHARD P.,

9 Plaintiff,

10 v.

11 NANCY A. BERRYHILL,

12 Defendant.

Case No. C17-6011JLR

ORDER REVERSING AND
REMANDING DENIAL OF
BENEFITS

13 I. INTRODUCTION

14 Plaintiff Richard P. seeks review of the denial of his application for supplemental
15 security income benefits under Title XVI of the Social Security Act (the "Act"), 42
16 U.S.C. §§ 1381-83f. Plaintiff contends that the Administrative Law Judge ("ALJ") erred
17 by (1) improperly discounting Plaintiff's testimony; (2) improperly weighing the medical
18 evidence; and (3) improperly assessing Plaintiff's residual functional capacity ("RFC")
19 and ability to work. (Pl. Op. Br. (Dkt. # 11) at 1.) As discussed below, the court
20 REVERSES the final decision of Defendant Nancy A. Berryhill, Deputy Commissioner
21 of the Social Security Administration for Operations (the "Commissioner"), and
22 REMANDS the matter for further administrative proceedings under sentence four of 42
23

1 U.S.C. § 405(g).

2 II. THE ALJ'S DECISION

3 Utilizing the five-step disability evaluation process,¹ the ALJ found:

4 **Step one:** Plaintiff has not engaged in substantial gainful activity since June 5,
5 2014, the application date. *See* 20 C.F.R. § 416.971 *et seq.*

6 **Step two:** Plaintiff has the following severe impairment: degenerative disc
7 disease. *See* 20 C.F.R. § 416.920(c).

8 **Step three:** Plaintiff does not have an impairment or combination of impairments
9 that meets or medically equals the severity of one of the listed impairments in 20
10 C.F.R. Part 404, Subpart P, Appendix 1. *See* 20 C.F.R. §§ 416.920(d), 416.925 &
11 416.926.

12 **Residual Functional Capacity:** Plaintiff can perform light work as defined in 20
13 C.F.R. § 416.967(b), except that he can occasionally lift, carry, push, and pull 20
14 pounds; frequently lift, carry, push, and pull 10 pounds; sit, stand, and walk six
15 hours out of an eight hour workday with normal breaks; frequently climb ramps
16 and stairs; occasionally climb ladders, ropes, and scaffolds; occasionally stoop and
17 crawl; frequently crouch; and must avoid concentrated exposure to extremes of
18 cold, vibrations, hazardous machinery, and unprotected heights.

19 **Step four:** Plaintiff is unable to perform any past relevant work. *See* 20 C.F.R.
20 § 416.965.

21 **Step five:** Considering Plaintiff's age, education, work experience, and RFC,
22 there are jobs that exist in significant numbers in the national economy that
23 Plaintiff can perform. *See* 20 C.F.R. §§ 416.969 & 416.969(a).

(Administrative Record ("AR") at 32-39.) Based on these findings, the ALJ found that
Plaintiff had not been under a disability, as defined in the Act, since June 5, 2014, the
application date.² (*Id.* at 39.) The Appeals Council denied Plaintiff's request for review,

¹ 20 C.F.R. § 416.920.

² Plaintiff stated in his opening brief that he submitted a new application for disability benefits,

1 making the ALJ's decision the Commissioner's final decision. (*Id.* at 1.)

2 III. DISCUSSION

3 Plaintiff, as the claimant, bears the burden of proving he is disabled within the
4 meaning of the Act. *See Meanel v. Apfel*, 172 F.3d 1111, 1113 (9th Cir. 1999). Pursuant
5 to 42 U.S.C. § 405(g), the court may only set aside a denial of social security benefits
6 when the ALJ's findings are based on legal error or not supported by substantial evidence
7 in the record as a whole. *Bayliss v. Barnhart*, 427 F.3d 1211, 1214 n.1 (9th Cir. 2005).
8 The ALJ is responsible for determining credibility, resolving conflicts in medical
9 testimony, and resolving any other ambiguities that exist. *Andrews v. Shalala*, 53 F.3d
10 1035, 1039 (9th Cir. 1995). Although the court is required to examine the entire record,
11 it may neither reweigh the evidence nor substitute its judgment for that of the ALJ. *See*
12 *Thomas v. Barnhart*, 278 F.3d 947, 954 (9th Cir. 2002).

14 A. The ALJ Erred in Rejecting Plaintiff's Testimony

15 Plaintiff contends that the ALJ erred in evaluating his symptom testimony. (*See*
16 *Pl. Op. Br.* at 9-12.) The Ninth Circuit has "established a two-step analysis for
17 determining the extent to which a claimant's symptom testimony must be credited."
18 *Trevizo v. Berryhill*, 871 F.3d 664, 678 (9th Cir. 2017). The ALJ must first determine
19 whether the claimant has presented objective medical evidence of an impairment that
20

21
22 and was found to be disabled beginning June 20, 2016. (*Pl. Op. Br.* at 2.) The court is limited in
23 its review to evidence in the administrative record, *see Harman v. Apfel*, 211 F.3d 1172, 1177
(9th Cir. 2000), but even if the court considered this claim, it would have no effect on the
outcome here.

1 “could reasonably be expected to produce the pain or other symptoms alleged.” *Id.*
2 (quoting *Garrison v. Colvin*, 759 F.3d 995, 1014-15 (9th Cir. 2014)). At this stage, the
3 claimant need only show that the impairment could reasonably have caused some degree
4 of the symptoms; he does not have to show that the impairment could reasonably be
5 expected to cause the severity of the symptoms alleged. *Id.* The ALJ found that Plaintiff
6 met this first step because his medically determinable impairments could reasonably be
7 expected to cause some of the symptoms he alleged. (AR at 35.)

8
9 If the claimant satisfies the first step, and there is no evidence of malingering, the
10 ALJ may only reject the claimant’s testimony “by offering specific, clear and convincing
11 reasons for doing so. This is not an easy requirement to meet.” *Trevizo*, 871 F.3d at 678
12 (quoting *Garrison*, 759 F.3d at 1014-15).

13 Although the ALJ found no evidence of malingering, he nevertheless rejected
14 Plaintiff’s testimony because it was not entirely consistent with the medical evidence.
15 (AR at 35.) The ALJ erred in doing so.

16 First, “an [ALJ] may not reject a claimant’s subjective complaints based solely on
17 a lack of objective medical evidence to fully corroborate the alleged severity of pain.”
18 *Rollins v. Massanari*, 261 F.3d 853, 856 (9th Cir. 2001) (quoting *Bunnell v. Sullivan*, 947
19 F.2d 341, 345 (9th Cir. 1991)) (alteration in original); *see also* 20 C.F.R. § 416.929(c)(2).
20 The records the ALJ cited here may have been relevant to the scope of Plaintiff’s
21 limitations, but they could not on their own support rejecting his testimony.
22

23 Second, the ALJ did not adequately tie his recitation of the medical evidence to his

1 decision to discount Plaintiff's testimony. "A finding that a claimant's testimony is not
2 credible 'must be sufficiently specific to allow a reviewing court to conclude the
3 adjudicator rejected the claimant's testimony on permissible grounds and did not
4 arbitrarily discredit a claimant's testimony regarding pain.'" *Brown-Hunter v. Colvin*,
5 806 F.3d 487, 493 (9th Cir. 2015) (quoting *Bunnell*, 947 F.2d at 345-46); *see also*
6 *Holohan v. Massanari*, 246 F.3d 1195, 1208 (9th Cir. 2001) ("[A]n ALJ cannot reject a
7 claimant's testimony without giving clear and convincing reasons. . . . [T]he ALJ must
8 specifically identify the testimony she or he finds not to be credible and must explain
9 what evidence undermines the testimony.") (citing *Reddick v. Chater*, 157 F.3d 715, 722
10 (9th Cir. 1998)). The ALJ merely repeated the medical evidence; he did not explain how
11 any of this contradicted Plaintiff's testimony. The ALJ consequently erred in rejecting
12 Plaintiff's symptom testimony.
13

14 **B. The ALJ Did Not Harmfully Err in Weighing the Medical Evidence**

15 Plaintiff further contends that the ALJ erred in evaluating the medical evidence.
16 (Pl. Op. Br. at 2-9.) In particular, Plaintiff argues that the ALJ erred in rejecting the
17 opinions of Brent Packer, M.D., and in giving great weight to the opinions of the state
18 agency consultants. (*Id.* at 8-9.)

19 At the beginning of his argument, Plaintiff recites the medical evidence and
20 summarily concludes that it supports his alleged symptoms. (*See id.* at 2-8.) The court
21 does not reweigh the evidence, so this recitation of the medical evidence without any
22 substantive argument is of little value. *See Thomas*, 278 F.3d at 954. Because Plaintiff
23

1 has not explained any specific errors with respect to the other medical opinions he
2 mentions, the court will not separately address those opinions. *See Carmickle v. Comm'r,*
3 *Soc. Sec. Admin.*, 533 F.3d 1155, 1161 n.2 (9th Cir. 2008) (citing *Paladin Assocs., Inc. v.*
4 *Mont. Power Co.*, 328 F.3d 1145, 1164 (9th Cir. 2003)).

5 1. The ALJ Did Not Harmfully Err in Weighing the Opinions of Dr. Packer

6 Dr. Packer reviewed some of Plaintiff's medical records, but did not examine
7 Plaintiff. (*See* AR at 270-74.) Based on his review, Dr. Packer diagnosed Plaintiff with
8 degenerative disc disease, syncope, and epilepsy/seizure disorder. (*Id.* at 274.) Dr.
9 Packer opined that Plaintiff was limited to sedentary work with other specific exertional
10 restrictions. (*Id.* at 270.)

11 The ALJ rejected several of Dr. Packer's opinions. (*See id.* at 36.) He found that
12 Plaintiff was limited to light work, whereas Dr. Packer opined that Plaintiff was limited
13 to sedentary work. (*See id.* at 36, 270.) The ALJ found that Plaintiff could sit, stand, and
14 walk for six hours in an eight hour workday, but Dr. Packer opined that Plaintiff was
15 limited to four hours in these activities. (*See id.*) The ALJ found no gross or fine motor
16 restrictions, whereas Dr. Packer opined that Plaintiff had significant restrictions in those
17 areas. (*See id.*)

18 The ALJ gave three reasons for his evaluation of Dr. Packer's opinions. First, Dr.
19 Packer's opinions were inconsistent with the opinions of examining physician James
20 Symonds, M.D. (*See* AR at 36, 260-69.) Second, Dr. Packer's opinions were
21 inconsistent with the objective medical evidence. (*See id.* at 36.) Third, Dr. Packer's
22
23

1 opinions were inconsistent with Plaintiff's reported daily activities. (*See id.*)

2 The ALJ's first reason for rejecting Dr. Packer's opinions withstands scrutiny.
3 Medical opinions are entitled to varying weight depending on the extent of the treating
4 relationship. *See Lester v. Chater*, 81 F.3d 821, 830 (9th Cir. 1995). Relevant here,
5 "[t]he opinion of an examining physician is . . . entitled to greater weight than the opinion
6 of a nonexamining physician." *Id.* (citing *Pitzer v. Sullivan*, 908 F.2d 502, 506 (9th
7 Cir.1990); *Gallant v. Heckler*, 753 F.2d 1450 (9th Cir.1984)). Dr. Symonds examined
8 Plaintiff, whereas Dr. Packer did not. (*See AR at 260-74.*) The ALJ was therefore
9 entitled to accept Dr. Symonds's opinions over Dr. Packer's where they conflicted.
10

11 The ALJ's second reason fails to withstand scrutiny. "The Commissioner may
12 reject the opinion of a non-examining physician by reference to specific evidence in the
13 medical record." *Sousa v. Callahan*, 143 F.3d 1240, 1244 (9th Cir. 1998) (citations
14 omitted). But the ALJ must rationally interpret the evidence he references. *See Thomas*,
15 278 F.3d at 954 (citing *Morgan v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec. Admin.*, 169 F.3d 595, 599 (9th
16 Cir. 1999)). Here, the ALJ cited to medical imaging studies, but did not explain how
17 those were inconsistent with Dr. Packer's opinions. (*See AR at 36.*) Those studies
18 indicated that Plaintiff has congenital cervical spine issues, spondylosis, and other
19 degenerative problems. (*See id.* at 241, 258, 285.) The court is unable to see how those
20 studies are inconsistent with Dr. Packer's opinions on Plaintiff's work limitations, and
21 thus the ALJ erred in rejecting Dr. Packer's opinions on this basis.
22

23 The ALJ's third reason for rejecting Dr. Packer's opinions, like his first reason,

1 withstands scrutiny. An ALJ may reasonably discount a doctor's opinions when it is
2 contradicted by the claimant's daily activities. *See Rollins*, 261 F.3d at 856; *Morgan*, 169
3 F.3d at 601-02. Here, the ALJ reasonably concluded that Dr. Packer's opinions were
4 inconsistent with Plaintiff's ability to garden every day, and to do so "very well." (AR at
5 36, 187.)

6 Although the ALJ's second reason for rejecting Dr. Packer's opinions was
7 erroneous, Plaintiff has failed to show harmful error. *See Ludwig v. Astrue*, 681 F.3d
8 1047, 1054 (9th Cir. 2012) (holding that the party challenging an administrative decision
9 bears the burden of proving harmful error) (citing *Shinseki v. Sanders*, 556 U.S. 396,
10 407-09 (2009)). An error is harmless "where it is 'inconsequential to the ultimate
11 disability determination.'" *Molina v. Astrue*, 674 F.3d 1104, 1115 (9th Cir. 2012)
12 (quoting *Carmickle v. Comm'r, Soc. Sec. Admin.*, 533 F.3d 1155, 1162 (9th Cir. 2008)).
13 The ALJ gave two valid reasons for rejecting Dr. Packer's opinions, so his inclusion of
14 an erroneous reason was inconsequential and therefore harmless.

15
16 2. The ALJ Did Not Harmfully Err in Weighing the Opinions of the State
17 Agency Medical Consultants

18 Two medical consultants reviewed Plaintiff's medical records and opined on his
19 conditions. Robert Bernardez-Fu, M.D. reviewed Plaintiff's records as part of the Social
20 Security Administration's ("SSA") initial disability determination. (*See* AR at 65-73.)
21 Robert Hander, M.D. reviewed Plaintiff's records as part of the SSA's reconsideration of
22 the disability determination. (*See id.* at 75-85.) Both doctors opined that Plaintiff was
23 limited to lifting and/or carrying 20 pounds occasionally and 10 pounds frequently; could

1 sit, stand, and/or walk with normal breaks for six hours in an eight hour workday; and
2 had several postural limitations. (*Id.* at 69-70, 81-82.)

3 The ALJ gave “great weight” to these opinions. (*Id.* at 36.) He found that they
4 were consistent with objective medical imaging studies, and consistent with the opinions
5 of other medical evaluators. (*Id.*)

6 Plaintiff has not demonstrated that the ALJ erred in weighing the opinions of Dr.
7 Bernardez-Fu and Dr. Hander. At most, Plaintiff argues that the ALJ should have
8 weighed these opinions differently because they did not review any medical evidence
9 created after November 2014. (*See* Pl. Op. Br. at 9.) That is a fact the ALJ could have
10 considered in weighing the opinions, but it does not establish that the ALJ’s interpretation
11 of those opinions was unreasonable. Plaintiff has thus failed to show that the ALJ
12 harmfully erred in evaluating the opinions of Dr. Bernardez-Fu and Dr. Hander. *See*
13 *Ludwig*, 681 F.3d at 1054 (citing *Shinseki*, 556 U.S. at 407-09); *Thomas*, 278 F.3d at 954.

14
15 **C. The ALJ Erred in Assessing Plaintiff’s RFC and Ability to Work**

16 Plaintiff last argues that the ALJ erred in his RFC determination, and consequently
17 erred at step five of the disability evaluation process. (Pl. Op. Br. at 12-13.) This
18 argument is largely derivative of Plaintiff’s other arguments, as it is based on the
19 contention that the ALJ failed to properly evaluate Plaintiff’s symptom testimony and the
20 medical evidence. (*See id.*) Because the Court has found that the ALJ erred in his
21 assessment of Plaintiff’s testimony, the Court agrees that the ALJ erred in his RFC and
22 step five findings. *See Robbins v. Soc. Sec. Admin.*, 466 F.3d 880, 885 (9th Cir. 2006)
23

1 (holding that the ALJ's RFC determination was not supported by substantial evidence
2 where he failed to properly account for all of the evidence).

3 **D. Scope of Remand**

4 Plaintiff asks the court to remand for an award of benefits. (Pl. Op. Br. at 13-14.)
5 The court may remand for an award of benefits where "the record has been fully
6 developed and further administrative proceedings would serve no useful purpose."
7 *McCartey v. Massanari*, 298 F.3d 1072, 1076 (9th Cir. 2002) (citing *Smolen v. Chater*,
8 80 F.3d 1273, 1290 (9th Cir. 1996)). But remand for an award of benefits "is a rare and
9 prophylactic exception to the well-established ordinary remand rule." *Leon v. Berryhill*,
10 808 F.3d 1041, 1044 (9th Cir. 2017). If additional proceedings can remedy defects in the
11 original administrative proceedings, a social security case should be remanded for further
12 proceedings. *McCartey*, 298 F.3d at 1076.

14 The appropriate remedy here is to remand for further proceedings. There are
15 conflicts between Plaintiff's testimony and the medical evidence that the court is not in a
16 position to decide. *See Andrews*, 53 F.3d at 1039. Without resolution of these
17 evidentiary issues, the court cannot conclude that the ALJ would be required to find
18 Plaintiff disabled here. *See Leon*, 880 F.3d at 1046-48 (affirming the district court's
19 decision to remand for further proceedings, rather than to remand for the payment of
20 benefits, where the record revealed conflicts, ambiguities, or gaps in the evidence).

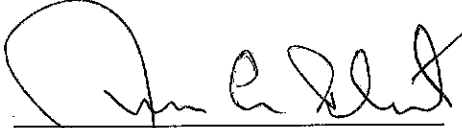
21 On remand, the ALJ must reevaluate Plaintiff's symptom testimony; reassess the
22 medical evidence as necessary; reassess Plaintiff's RFC; and conduct further proceedings
23

1 as necessary to reevaluate the disability determination in light of this opinion.

2 **IV. CONCLUSION**

3 For the foregoing reasons, the Commissioner's final decision is REVERSED and
4 this case is REMANDED for further administrative proceedings under sentence four of
5 42 U.S.C. § 405(g).

6 DATED this ^u15 day of October, 2018.

7 
8 JAMES L. ROBART
9 United States District Judge